

# California DOCTOR with a Mission

By LISETTE B. POOLE

Dr. Anmol S. Mahal, chosen to head California's largest doctors' association, will speak for 35,000 physicians, and what he wants to talk about is more equal access to health care in the most populous U.S. state.

**D**r. Anmol S. Mahal was raised with a deep respect for culture, tradition and service—qualities that endear him to his patients, and which he brings to the chairmanship of the California Medical Association (CMA) as the state attempts to reconfigure the shape of its health care in the 21st century.

With a smile and a gentle nod of his blue turban he confesses the journey from visiting medical student to the top of his profession has been very rewarding. Now he feels it is time to give back to society a measure of the generosity and acceptance it offered him.

Dr. Mahal, 55, was voted president-elect of the CMA at its annual House of Delegates meeting in March. He steps up to the chairmanship of the 35,000 strong physicians' organization next year, on its 100th anniversary. The Amritsar native is the first Sikh physician to hold such a position in the United States.

Critics say he has been targeting the position for a while. He agrees he has spent time on various boards and is all fired up about projects that could lead to better medical health in California, especially for the more than seven million who have no medical insurance.

The leadership role he is to assume comes at a time when the two million strong Indian American community in America is flourishing and its elders are seeking to establish firm spiritual, cultural and educational foundations for their children.

"Some time ago, anyone with a turban walking through a public place would attract a lot of curious looks, but not anymore," Dr. Mahal said during an interview with SPAN. "Being a visible minority can work both ways. I try to use my ethnic appearance to my advantage."

Artifacts in his office, notebooks on his desk, and the wallpaper in this clinic reflect Hindi calligraphy and graceful art designs carefully chosen to blend in with the western style chairs and furniture. He shares the clinic with his wife Dr. Surjit K. Mahal, a family physician.

The Mahals came to the United States from India five months after they were married in 1972. Freshly graduated from New Delhi's All India Institute of Medical Sciences, he served his internship in internal medicine and a fellowship in hepatology at the College of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. In 1977 he chose to complete a fellowship in gastroenterology at the Stanford University Medical Center in California.

"Of course California's sun and the gurdwara built by the earliest Indian Sikh immigrants in the 1890s were a plus and I wanted to experience all that," he recalls.

The first two years in California were hard, he says. "This is a different culture. The language is spoken differently. I did not seem to understand the local humor, the experiences and the event-based history. All these are important to relate to the patients. But once we cleared these immigrant hoops it was easy to fall in love with the



*Dr. Anmol S. Mahal, president-elect of the California Medical Association, with more than 35,000 physicians from all specialties, is seen at his Fremont, California, office.*

lifestyle of this country!" They settled in Fremont, a city on San Francisco Bay. They have two children, Subena Mahal, 28, a family practice resident, and Vikram, 23, a college student.

The most enticing aspect of life for him in the United States is a professional one. "There is a freedom in this culture, which you do not experience elsewhere. At a professional level, you can actually express yourself. The soldier can tell the general what he really thinks of his war plan. I have constantly done that, sometimes to my peril, but most of the time to my advantage. There is a certain respect from the superiors who are themselves comfortable with who they are. A few may certainly feel threatened, but to a large extent, you can have debates and diagnosis on the highest intellectual level. We grew up in a society where the authority comes from the top, and an implied code of behavior where it's not acceptable to question."

Still, it is aspects of his Indian culture that help him find favor with his patients. Older patients say they like the quiet, soft-spoken way this gastroenterologist uses when inquiring about their health and listening to the details of their ailments. Younger ones praise his business-like efficiency blended with a little bit of humor. Both say they appreciate his unassuming manner and attentiveness whether they are in his clinic, or run into him at the local mall or bookstore.

Dr. Mahal is preparing to tackle three important projects: A free medical clinic at an Indian Community Center, a framework to bring medical services to the millions of uninsured Californians and setting policies to ensure access to medical care for all. He brings one of the chief tenants of Sikhism, the philosophy of equality, into play as he grapples with the issues.

As the Indian community in California rapidly dwarfs other Asian ethnicities—Chinese, Filipino and Vietnamese—they are building community centers where hundreds of families come to relax and interact. There is something for everyone. Children and teenagers can take classes in Indian languages, culture, dance, arts, crafts,



music and singing. Young professionals may use exercise machines, yoga, meditation and nutrition classes while the elderly use board games, books and magazines.

The center in Fremont is adding a free medical clinic spearheaded by Dr. Mahal. Volunteer physicians will run it, as part of a credentialing program and the staff will include a medical social worker who will provide information about various state-run plans. Free medication and health awareness classes will be offered, especially for hypertension, a common, yet life-threatening condition among the elders in the community. "I am very excited about this. It is our way of giving back to our community," says Dr. Mahal.

With this same attitude he seeks to expand the California Physician Corps he helped create several years ago. It is similar to medical outreach programs in countries like India and Egypt where there are large suburban populations. "In an open society you cannot assign doctors to go do it, you have to give incentives. We found the best incentive," Dr. Mahal says.

Under the program, fully-trained physicians who have finished their residencies, sign up for service in a rural area and in return receive \$105,000 over three years to repay medical school debts. Fifty-eight physicians are already enrolled. "We are hopeful that they will fall in love with the community and stay there after three years," he says.

Equal medical access is not just a motto for Dr. Mahal. He and other ethnic physicians are comparing notes. "Our populations have special needs so we are trying to present ideas and come up with resolutions for the CMA house on public health issues....

"The best example [are] the Latinos. They have astronomical incidents of diabetes—so it is in the state's best interest for the future public health to look at lifestyle changes, education, preventative treatment and awareness, basic early diagnosis," he explains.

In addition he and other physicians are concerned about disparities in care levels. "If you get a heart attack, the state-of-the-art care is to give clot-dissolving treatment and save the muscle from death. In the U.S. right now, 59 percent of white men, 55 percent of black men, 49 percent of white women and 44 percent of black women get that treatment. We don't know why. This is



*Dr. Anmol S. Mahal and his wife, Dr. Surjit K. Mahal, with former President Bill Clinton at their hilltop home in Mountainview, California, in 2000.*

where we need to equalize access," he explains.

He is passionate about the need to find solutions for delivering better care. "The people who cook for us, the people who clean, bathe and serve medications to our parents, people who drive us around, business owners, dry cleaners, subway clerks, these are the basic bricks of our society. They are the people who are going without health care," Dr. Mahal says. "Generally they work at minimum wage, without benefits, keeping their families together. Those are the folks we hope we can help." □

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